

## Cinema as Relief and Final Goal

Ricardo Aldarondo

B.S. in Information Sciences. Cinema critic for fifteen years on the newspaper *El Diario Vasco* and a regular contributor to the magazines *Fotogramas*, *Rock de Lux*, *Nosferatu* and *Dirigido Por*. Member of the executive committee and head of communications of the San Sebastian International Film Festival. Author of diverse books, among them *Robert Wise* (2005) and *Películas clave del cine de aventuras* (2008).

Correspondence: Ricardo Aldarondo. (Spain).

e-mail: [r.aldarondo@terra.es](mailto:r.aldarondo@terra.es)

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### Summary

In the history of cinema many films, from fiction to documentaries, have reflected how death and disease affect human beings. A few of them, however, have established a total and truthful relationship, almost symbiotic, between a terminal patient and the recorded image. *Lightning Over Water* (1979) by Nicholas Ray and Wim Wenders, and *Las alas de la vida* (2006), by Antonio Pérez Canet have explored the role of the camera not only as an element of communication for the patient to transmit his or her sensations in the final stretch of life, but also as a kind of palliative care for the patient. But the presence of the camera, the filming of the dying moments to convert them into a film can also lead to some intimate reflections and moral dilemmas around the terrain that falls somewhere between the documentary as a source of knowledge and the spectacle that cinema always entails, although in a slight and tangential way.

**Keywords:** Palliative care; Terminal illness; Portrayal of agony; Representation; Ethics; Spectacle; Taboo; Friendship; Dedication.

Films such as *The Sea Within* (2004) by Alejandro Amenábar, *The Barbarian Invasions/ Les invasions barbares* (2003) by Denys Arcand and *Million Dollar Baby* (2004) by Clint Eastwood reflect the situation of patients, their vital needs and their encounter with death, the care given, the dedication of those around them, and pose different issues around suffering and death.

On some occasions, however, there has been another relationship posed between cinema and the patient, not as a piece of fiction taken to the screen (even when inspired by such a dire reality as that depicted in *The Sea Within*) but with the camera itself as a witness to the end of life of a terminal patient. Film, the actual substance of which cinema is made, becomes the only medicine possible for the terminal patient, who decides that his or her progressive deterioration should be filmed and become the narrative and documentary subject matter of a film, which after that person's death or just when he or she is about to die will find a vehicle of communication in film festivals or commercial theatres. These are

cases in which certain links are established between artistic creativity, disease, affectionate assistance and spectacle, links that are as interesting as they are thorny. Here we deal with two examples of this kind of film: *Lightning Over Water* (1979) by Nicholas Ray and Wim Wenders and *Las alas de la vida* (2006), by Antonio Pérez Canet.

### *Lightning Over Water*

#### Technical details

**Title:** *Lightning Over Water*

**Country:** Sweden and Germany

**Year:** 1980

**Directors:** Nicholas Ray and Wim Wenders.

**Music:** Ronee Blakley

**Screenwriters:** Nicholas Ray and Wim Wenders.

**Cast:** Gerry Bamman, Ronee Blakley, Pierre Cottrell, Stefan Czapsky, Mitch Dubin, Tom Farrell, Becky Johnston, Tom Kaufman, Pat Kirck, Edward Lachman, Martin Müller, Craig

Nelson, Nicholas Ray, Susan Ray, Timothy Ray, Martin Schäfer, Chris Sievernich and Wim Wenders.

**Color:** Color

**Runtime:** 116

**Genre:** Documentary, Drama

**Production Companies:** Road Movies Filmproduktion, Viking Film and Wim Wenders Productions

**Synopsis:** Documentary that captures the last days of Nicholas Ray, dying of cancer in his New York home.

Nicholas Ray (1916-1979), an American director of great renown in the 1950s and early 60s, with films such as *Johnny Guitar* (1954), *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), *King of Kings* (1961) and *55 Days at Peking* (1963), left commercial filmmaking because he was fed up with the industry and turned to making experimental films and teaching, until he died of lung cancer in 1979.

Wim Wenders, a German director submerged in the counter-culture of the end of the 60s, and one of the fundamental names in the new German cinema of the time, creator of both films of fiction such as *Der Amerikanische Freund / The American Friend*, (1977), *Paris Texas* (1984), *Der Himmel über Berlin / Wings of Desire* (1987) and *Don't Come Knocking* (2005) and documentaries, such as the musical *Buena Vista Social Club* (1999), admired Nicholas Ray. Both directors became friends two years before filming *Lightning Over Water*, when Wenders hired Nicholas Ray to play a role in *The American Friend*. When Ray was diagnosed with incurable cancer, he decided not to stay in hospital and instead to spend his last weeks at home, surrounded by his wife and friends, making a film that would turn out to be a strange mixture of docudrama, fiction and representation of reality.

*Lightning Over Water* was constructed on the spot, changing its objectives and its plot along with the deterioration of Ray's health. It began to pose a series of dilemmas for Wim Wenders, who was not sure he was doing the right thing by filming his friend's death.

In the film, Wenders arrives at Ray's house and tells him: *I was afraid to come see you because I was afraid to see you weak. But there's something else that I was even more afraid of: I thought that I would find myself feeling attracted to your weakness or your suffering. And if that hap-*

*pened, I would have to leave you. For me it would be like abusing you or betraying you.* Nicholas Ray answered: *That won't happen* (\*).

In a lecture Nicholas Ray gave when he was still strong enough to leave the house, he talks about how they were preparing *Lightning Over Water*, or what the picture was originally going to be: *The film is about a man who wants to bring himself all together before he dies: a regaining of self-esteem from a once very highly successful man.* Taking into account that Nicholas Ray was a Hollywood director who, sixteen years before, in 1963, stopped making films in Hollywood because he could not stand the pressure of the big studios, it seems that he is talking about himself, and that in this final film he wanted to recover some of his own self-esteem and the truest spirit of himself as a filmmaker.

Ray had interpreted a painter who forged paintings in Wim Wenders's *The American Friend*. And now he was writing a story about a terminally ill painter who was successful but who now has no money and is forced to steal to survive. Wenders says to him, *Why not turn it into a film about you?*

At one point they have the following conversation:

– Ray: *Well, I have one action, which is to regain my self image and my image and for the rest of the world.*

– Wenders: *My action is going to be defined by yours. My action is going to be defined by you facing death.*

– Ray: *Well, that would mean that you're stepping on my back, which I don't mind; hell that's what I'm here for.*

By means of a voiceover added later to the film, Wenders reflects: *I was more and more under the pressure of making a movie; I found myself stuck and preoccupied with the sheer mechanics of setting up shots and deciding upon schedules rather than being concerned with Nick .... All I knew was that Nick was in immense pain, that it might be better to stop shooting, but that nothing might be more painful to him than that.* Wenders also asks himself: *Was I demanding too much from Nick? Where did my responsibility start and where did it end?*

He then takes the camera to the hospital and continues filming there, even though Ray's state had got considerably worse (Figure 1). With irony and des-

\* this quote and subsequent ones are taken from the dialogue in *Lightning Over Water*.



Figure 1: Physical deterioration of Nicholas Ray

olation, Ray comments: *It looks like they've taken several components off my horrible face.* Ray explains how the first tumours appeared and that in the first operation they closed him up without doing anything, because it looked very bad.

In the last sequence in which Nicholas Ray appears, he is singing and rambling in his dying state, almost delirious. *I don't know why I have to go now. I'm beginning to drool.* The camera remains impassive in a fixed shot before him. Ray tells Wenders: *I'm finished. Say "cut".* Wenders replies: *No, you say cut.* Ray finally says: *"Cut".* A disturbing representation of the end of life, the end of the film. It is a very sad and moving moment that causes mixed feelings of rejection and tenderness. We feel as if we were accompanying the patient at the end, but it is also a somewhat immodest spectacle.

Wenders explains his own dilemma in the film: *I was getting very confused. Each time the camera was pointing at Nick, something that I had no control of, it was in the camera itself, it was looking at Nick through the viewfinder, like a very precise instrument, the camera showed clearly and mercilessly that his time was running out. No, you couldn't really see it with your bare eyes, there was always hope. But not in the camera. I didn't know how to take it. I was terrified.*

In the epilogue we see the farewell ceremony for the director, which consists of taking Ray's ashes on a boat on the Hudson River. The members of the technical team and Ray's friends make spontaneous comments: *He was looking for a way to cure the cancer. He would have died sooner in if it wasn't for this film.* Another says: *I think he was burting, also.* And another: *In these cases you have to try anything to help someone. His dying was his last directorial assertion.*

The film stirs up many questions that are not easy to answer:

– Was making this film a way for a man who experienced cinema intensely to cling to life?

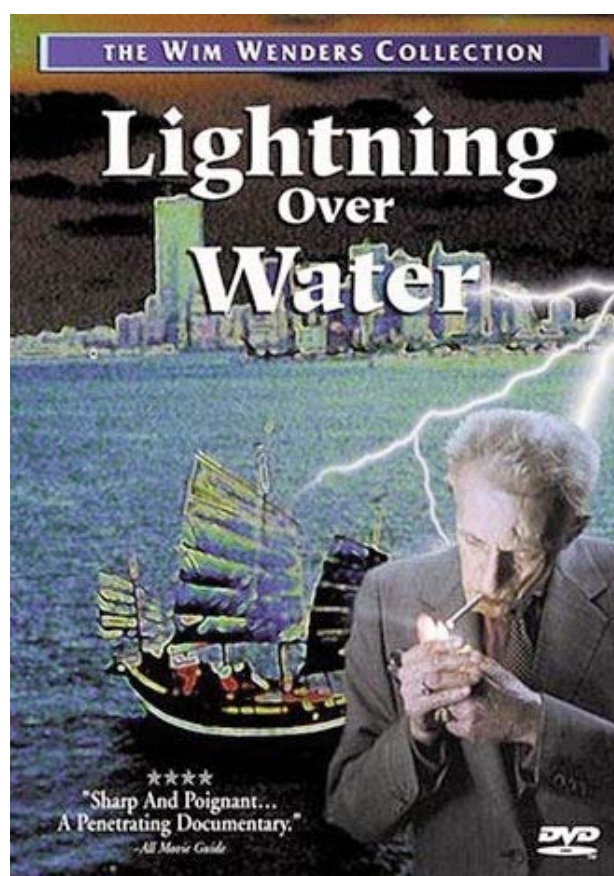
– Was Ray looking for a way to give himself a little more life, just like he gave life to the characters in his films?

– Was it a way to take his last breath doing what he most loved?

– Was filmmaking the only medicine possible for him, the only painkiller he could have after rejecting all medical treatment?

– And for Wim Wenders, the German friend who accompanied him in his suffering, was making this film a form of love and devotion, giving Ray the opportunity to make his last film when he no longer had any strength left?

– Was Wim Wenders taking advantage of dramatic material of unquestionable power to make an unusual film that could make him famous from the death of another person?



Cover of the American DVD with the main character, Nicholas Ray, in the bottom right-hand corner



**Las alas de la vida****Technical Details****Title:** *Las alas de la vida***Country:** Spain**Year:** 2006**Director:** Antoni Pérez Canet**Music:** Carlos Cristos and Enric Murillo**Screenwriters :** Enric Murillo and Carlos Cristos**Cast:** Enric Benito, Carlos Cristos, Carmela Cristos Font, Carmen Font, Olvido González, Arantza Gorospe, Omar Karpyza and Carlos Simón**Color:** Color**Runtime:** 90 minutes**Genre:** Documentary**Production Companies:** Gorgos Films

**Synopsis:** Carlos Cristos and his wife, Carmen Font, are doctors. They live in Majorca with their eight year old daughter, Carmela. Carlos has always led an active life, and is passionate about mountain climbing and hang-gliding. As a doctor he has often had to inform patients of a serious diagnosis and has had to accompany some of them until their death. His life changes when he sits in front of his own doctor and hears the diagnosis: M.S.A. (Multiple System Atrophy), a neurodegenerative disease that leads to disability and death. Together with his family and friends, he demands a dignified life and death.

**Awards:** Tiempo de Historia awards at the Valladolid Film Festival.

Carlos Cristos is a forty-some doctor, a music lover and hang-glider, among other things, who is suffering from a rare and incurable degenerative disease. Knowing his fate, he decides on the one hand to become an observer of his own disease, studying the symptoms, its evolution and the degeneration of his body. On the other hand, he wishes to make a record of this study and this degradation, through the filming done by the director, Antonio Pérez Canet (Figure 2).

In the film, Carlos Cristos tells his life story, what he was like before the disease took hold, and how together with his family and friends and the filming team he is facing inevitable death in a more or less short time. The film shows home movies of Carlos paragliding; he was an incredibly active man and always hungry for wisdom and knowledge. The film also shows his gradual degeneration which impedes normal movement, communication and reasoning.



Figure 2: A moment in the filming of *Las alas de la vida*

This life that is being snuffed out little by little is shown on film, at the sufferer's own request.

As spectators we are moved by seeing such an interesting man, at the same time that we know he will soon be gone and that all that life and knowledge deployed in many areas is only going to last a very short time, as the disease brings him great suffering. It is a simple and respectful film, very candid and poignant. There is no shock effect whatsoever, nor are the spectators' feelings manipulated. The doors of Carlos's house are open to us, along with his feelings and sensations in the face of life and death. We are touched by the sorrow of seeing someone so intelligent, so full of life, on the brink of disappearing, but at the same time the film transmits a certain sense of hope, despite the inevitable end. Just as with *Lightning Over Water*, in *Las alas de la vida* it is the patient himself who decides to convert his last days into the subject of a film.

Even so, certain dilemmas still arise:

– Is there something immoral about converting this death, this terminal disease into an element that is in some way linked to spectacle?

– How does this situate the viewer, who is turned into a kind of 'voyeur' of another's suffering, which, above all, is real suffering?

– How does it help to watch this final deterioration of a person almost as a live performance?

– Is this final work built around a person's dying a relief or an antidote for that person in the face of imminent death? Does the film itself serve as palliative care, replacing a hospital stay?

– Is cinema in these cases helping to overcome the taboo of the ‘fear’ we feel of terminal patients, and does it help the viewer or individuals in general to approach a situation like this with more affection and normality?

Both films also contain another very important element: humour, an ironic view of life, brought to bear above all by the patient himself. It is also present, although in a different way, in *Les invasions barbares* and *The Sea Within*, as if the patients wished to do away with the feelings of impotence and sorrow of those around them and in this way say goodbye.

Curiously enough, Wim Wenders observed that the film crew working on *Lightning Over Water* was the most close-knit and the one he had the most intense experience with of all those with which he had worked.

Antonio Pérez Canet, in a recent interview, spoke of: *the team spirit that emerged during filming, the topic affected us deeply, because we all grew a lot with this film on both a personal and a professional level. Carlos and everything around him grabbed hold of us all. No one who started on the project was able to leave it*<sup>1</sup>.

In both cases, the filmmakers and their crews, together with the friends and families of the patients, provided palliative care, with film as the material giving pain-relief and a vital goal to the patients.



Spanish poster with Carlos Cristos in the foreground

Carlos Cristos died in the early hours of Saturday, 26 April, 2008.

## References

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